

Filozofická fakulta Univerzity Palackého

Edgar Allan Poe as a Hidden Moralist

Bakalářská práce



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Edgar Allan Poe as a Hidden Moralist
(Bakalářská práce)

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Prohlašuji, že jsem tuto bakalářskou práci vypracovala samostatně a uvedla úplný seznam citované a použité literatury.

V Olomouci dne 2011

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction	6
2. Didacticism versus Emotional Effect	7
3. Morality versus Immorality	12
4. Violence as a Means of Catharsis	26
5. Perversity as a Primal Impulse	32
6. Death as a Moral Lesson	40
7. Conclusion	45
8. Summary	46
9. Bibliography	50

1. Introduction

This BA thesis will explore Edgar Allan Poe's short fiction in order to find out whether Poe's works are written only for the emotional effect or whether they adhere to some kind of explicit or implicit moral code. This BA thesis will analyse and compare Edgar Allan Poe's short stories with regard to the presence or absence of morality, fundamental social conventions and ethical standards of his time (the 19th century).

During the past two centuries, many people from the literary circles have argued that Edgar Allan Poe's writing is at least morally ambiguous if not completely immoral. Even Poe himself suggests that morality is not considered important when he writes. In addition, Poe as a literary critic argues that the main goal of literature is aesthetic, not moral, and therefore the author of fiction is not obliged to educate and instruct the reader concerning his behaviour and duties towards the society.

According to the popular opinion, Edgar Allan Poe is a writer that insists on art or literature having nothing to do with moral or ethics. Nevertheless, the main aim of this BA thesis is to demonstrate that his short fiction is capable of proving otherwise. In spite of Poe's aversion to didacticism and moralizing in literature, his short stories convey a moral judgement to the attentive reader.

This BA thesis will deal with the reflection of Poe's literary theories in his short story production, and it will try to prove that his literary works are not amoral or even immoral.

2. Didacticism versus Emotional Effect

As a critic Edgar Allan Poe was strongly opposed to didacticism and moralizing in literature. “The adjective *didactic*, which means intended to give instruction, is applied to works of literature that are designed to expound a branch of knowledge, or else to embody a moral, religious, or philosophical doctrine or theme.”¹ Generally we may say that didacticism emphasizes instructional and informative qualities and features in literature. In fact, didactic literature intends not primarily to entertain but to educate the reader.

In his critical essays, Edgar Allan Poe criticises the works of the authors (mainly poets) of his time and specifically stands out against didacticism, which he calls the worst of “heresies.”² It is highly probable that this statement (together with the frequent presence of violence, perversity and death in his short stories) has been for centuries the basis for literary criticism claiming that Poe’s works are at least anti-moralistic if not even immoral.

David Grantz in his critical essay “Perversity, Poe’s primal impulse” (2001) explores the reasons why are Poe’s works so frequently considered amoral or immoral. He claims that Poe’s short stories often have a moral tone, however, the repeated presence of violence and perversity, and the denying of God lead the critics to the conclusion that Poe (and his works) was immoral. In the essay Grantz says that:

Poe himself eschewed *conventional* morality, which he believed stems from man’s attempts to dictate the purposes of God. Poe saw God more as process than purpose. He believed that moralists derive their beliefs from *a priori* knowledge. Yet Poe employed in his writing the diction of the moral tone, which causes confusion for readers immersed in this tradition.³

¹ Meyer Howard Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1999) 65.

² Edgar Allan Poe, “The Poetic Principle,” *The Chief American Prose Writers*, ed. Norman Foerster (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1916) 135.

³ David Grantz, “Perversity, Poe’s primal impulse“ 2001, 12 January 2011
<<http://www.poedecoder.com/essays/safe/index.shtml>>.

In fact, the themes of Poe's short stories are often controversial and their conclusion ambiguous. That is presumably the main reason for the reader's confusion and uncertainty of scholars when considering Poe's morality. Nevertheless, the *uncertainty* about someone's morals does not necessarily mean he is amoral or immoral.

Edgar Allan Poe is an author famous for using the emotional effect to impress the reader. He usually does so by evoking the feelings of horror or terror in the reader, and especially by using our inherent fear of death. In Poe's short stories, all elements (such as the plot, narrator, main characters, setting, style of writing, choice of vocabulary, reader's own imagination etc.) contribute to the achievement of a single emotional effect.

Actually, we might state that Poe's short stories are dominated and unified by the emotional effect, and that the emotional effect is in fact a means of delivering the (instructive or even moral) message of the short story to the reader. According to David Hirsch, Edgar Allan Poe "had a tendency to conflate morality and aesthetics"⁴ in his works. Moreover, Hirsch claims that Poe's theory of effect was so influential that it has blinded the critics as well as the general reading public. Specifically he says:

Poe's theory of effect has blinded critics to the moral issues in his fiction. [...] Poe was a more subtle analyst of conscience and morals than even his most sympathetic critics seem willing to allow. The stories written between 1843 and 1849 study variations in human depravity and moral consciousness.⁵

It seems quite natural that both critics and readers have been blinded by the emotional effect theory applied in Poe's short fiction, because Poe uses it in a very attractive and sophisticated way. Especially, his most influential theory of Fear and the horror features in some short stories may divert the reader's attention from the moral issues.

⁴ David Hirsch, "Poe as Moralist: the Transvaluation of Values" 1998, 12 January 2011 <<http://www.eapoe.org/papers/psblctrs/pl19951.htm>>.

⁵ David Hirsch, "Poe as Moralist: the Transvaluation of Values" 1998, 12 January 2011 <<http://www.eapoe.org/papers/psblctrs/pl19951.htm>>.

The importance of the emotional effect in Poe's short stories and tales may be best summed up by his own words. In the review to Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales* published in *Graham's Magazine*, Poe wrote:

A skilful literary artist has constructed a tale. If wise, he has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents; but having conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique or single *effect* to be wrought out, he then invents such incidents – he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect. If his very initial sentence tends not to the outbringing of this effect, then he has failed in his first step. In the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design. And by such means, with such care and skill, a picture is at length painted which leaves in the mind of him who contemplates it with a kindred art, a sense of the fullest satisfaction.⁶

Edgar Allan Poe's short stories have always been considered controversial and problematic as for their placing in the history of literary criticism. Moreover, Poe himself is said to be a very controversial and complex author. As Vincent Buranelli puts it: "Poe is the most complex personality in the entire gallery of American authors. No one else fuses such discordant psychological attributes, or offers to the world an appearance so various."⁷

The first one to attribute to Poe's works the label of depravity and immorality was a literary critic and Poe's first biographer Rufus Wilmot Griswold (1815-1857), whose unauthorized modifications of Poe's dicta and baseless slanders about Poe himself have had a great influence upon the subsequent criticism and teaching of Poe.

On the other hand, Van Wyck Brooks (1886-1963), an American literary critic and famous biographer, wrote in 1915 in *America's Coming of Age* that "nothing is more sinister about Poe than his tacit acceptance of common

⁶ Edgar Allan Poe, "Twice-Told Tales: A Review," *Graham's Magazine* 20.4 (April 1842): 254, 10 January 2011 <<http://www.ibiblio.org/eldritch/nh/nhpoea.html>>.

⁷ Vincent Buranelli, *Edgar Allan Poe* (New Haven: Twayne Publishers, 1961) 17.

morals.”⁸ As we can see from the above mentioned examples, there are as many opinions of Poe as there are critics. Nevertheless, it should be the reader who decides after he or she reads Poe’s short stories carefully.

In the literary circles, there still exist (few) critics who argue in Poe’s favour, for example Jay L. Halio, who in his essay “The Moral Mr. Poe” (1968) defends Poe’s short fiction as moral, using the examples of “Morella” and “Ligeia.”

One would think Edgar Allan Poe would be the last to claim a moral for his tales or poems: he is well-known in the annals of literary criticism for his dicta on “the heresy of the didactic” and other anti-moralistic strictures. But Poe comments that a moral *undercurrent* is not undesirable. [...] His actual work in fiction is thus not without its moral basis, and in several stories on the will — “Morella,” for example, and “Ligeia” — Poe offers variations upon a theme which cannot be called other than moral.⁹

“Morella” was first published in the *Southern Literary Messenger* in 1835. It tells the story of an unnamed narrator and his beautiful wife Morella who is greatly interested in mysticism and achieves immortality for her soul. However, her body continues to deteriorate. Finally, she dies in childbirth but her soul passes into her daughter, who after several years has started to resemble Morella very much. Her father, the narrator, decides to have her baptized (Morella after her mother), but during the ceremony his daughter dies. While putting her body into the tomb, he finds out that there is no trace of the first Morella.

“Ligeia,” first published in 1838, is a short story with many similarities to the previous one. It is, as well as “Morella,” a remarkable example of the human power of will. The story follows the life of an unnamed narrator and his beautiful and highly intelligent wife Ligeia, who becomes ill and soon dies. After her tragic death, the narrator falls in love and marries again. Unfortunately, Lady Rowena (his new wife) dies as well. Nevertheless, overnight Lady Rowena

⁸ quoted from Edward Wagenknecht, *Edgar Allan Poe: A Man Behind the Legend* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963) 82.

⁹ Jay L. Halio, “The Moral Mr. Poe,” *Poe Newsletter* 2.1 (1968): 23, 26 December 2010 <<http://www.eapoe.org/pstudies/PS1960/p1968204.htm>>.

comes back from the dead, but transformed into narrator's first wife – Ligeia, whose will has in fact dominated the mind of the weak-willed narrator and his second wife Rowena.

According to Jay L. Halio, the two short stories point their moral at the conclusion, at the point of the greatest emotional impact, as he calls it.¹⁰ The reincarnation of both Morella and Ligeia has turned into a real horror, and at this place, at the end of the stories, Poe demonstrates to readers the terrible consequences of abusing mysticism and dark powers, or trifling with Evil in general. Moreover, Poe clearly states the fact that people (even the strong-willed ones) cannot defeat death, or at least not permanently.

Of course, the two above mentioned short stories are meant to be metaphors and the reader should not take them literally. Nevertheless, the reader is asked to take a moral lesson from the dreadful fate of the main characters, who tried to outsmart death. In “Morella” and “Ligeia,” Poe presents the harsh but simple reality: no matter how smart you are (and we may claim that Morella and Ligeia were smart enough) you cannot outsmart death, and moreover, if you try it, it will lead to a horrible disaster. And this is *de facto* the moral of the two short stories, introduced by Poe in a very effective way.

To sum it up, Jay L. Halio in his essay “The Moral Mr. Poe” claims that “the emotional effect, the horror, *is* the moral.”¹¹ Hence, according to the above mentioned facts, we may argue that an author of fiction does not necessarily have to choose between didactic and aesthetic features, because literature is capable of comprising both the emotional effect and the moral.

¹⁰ see Jay L. Halio, “The Moral Mr. Poe,” *Poe Newsletter* 2.1 (1968): 23, 26 December 2010
<<http://www.eapoe.org/pstudies/PS1960/p1968204.htm>>.

¹¹ Jay L. Halio, “The Moral Mr. Poe,” *Poe Newsletter* 2.1 (1968): 24, 26 December 2010
<<http://www.eapoe.org/pstudies/PS1960/p1968204.htm>>.

3. Morality versus Immorality

When considering Poe's moral code in general and the presence or absence of moralisms in his short fiction, we should not confuse Poe's opinions with the opinions and behaviour of the fictional characters in his short stories. Moreover, it is always the reader, not the author, who has the real obligation of choice considering the message of the story. Whether we consider a short story moral or immoral depends usually on our point of view.

The writer in his works is always presenting an issue and its consequences, but it is the reader himself who should take a lesson from them. In addition, writing about crimes, death and perversity does not necessarily make the works immoral. Actually, the perverse and violent behaviour of Poe's fictional characters may serve as a strong warning and remind us of the depravity of the society and the presence of evil in the world.

Furthermore, it would be more unprejudiced and appropriate to say that Edgar Allan Poe "deliberately creates bizarre human interactions and situations in his fiction for the purpose of pushing the serious reader into new moral territory"¹² than claiming that the frequent presence of violence in Poe's fiction shows evidence of his depravity and serious lack of morality in his works.

It is obvious that for Poe writing was not a simple task that works through teaching lessons. The primary goal of his writing was to stimulate the reader's emotional and moral consciousness, and in addition to point out the depravity of both the individual and the society.

We may claim that Edgar Allan Poe's short stories are works of pure intellectual exploration, because the boundaries between good and evil, will and morality, ambivalence and integrity are often fuzzy, and therefore the reader has to contemplate them with genuine profoundness.

It is true that the main themes and motives in Poe's short stories are very often concerned with death, crime and violence. This fact has presumably been the basis for the label "non-didactic and anti-moralistic" given to Edgar Allan Poe by literary critics and scholars. Vincent Buranelli, for instance, says that "the

¹² David Hirsch, "Poe as Moralist: the Transvaluation of Values" 1998, 12 January 2011
<<http://www.eapoe.org/papers/psblctr/pl19951.htm>>.

central body of Poe's work seems to be a tissue of nightmares – a literary fabric shot with disease, madness, death, hideous murders, ghastly exhumations, and shrieks in the night.”¹³

Nevertheless, it is hard to believe that there are no moral conclusions in Poe's literary works at all. Furthermore, as Edward Wagenknecht says “the question arises whether his [Poe's] creative writings were conditioned by his beliefs or his beliefs deduced from his writings.”¹⁴ There is no doubt that some of Poe's short stories are morally ambiguous, or at least the behaviour of some of the characters in his short stories certainly is; however, this fact does not prove the immorality of Poe himself. Even Vincent Buranelli, one of the most severe critics of Poe, says that no matter what Poe writes about “he was no sadist, no masochist, no pervert, no rake.”¹⁵

Moreover, if Poe's materials were often morbid, his method was not. Edward Wagenknecht in his book *Edgar Allan Poe: the Man behind the Legend* (1963) claims that: “His heroes analyze their obsessions in a sane, perfectly logical way, and he presents the analysis in terms of highly finished style.”¹⁶ Therefore we may affirm that Edgar Allan Poe's style of writing is not morbid, even though the subject-matters of his short stories are often concerned with perversity and violence, and might be called morbid by some readers or critics.

As for his nature, Edgar Allan Poe was certainly not an optimistic writer. In many of his short stories, Poe shows his disbelief in the inherent goodness of the individual and the true morality of the society. We may say that his criticism is frequently harsh but adequate.

“The Man That Was Used Up” (1839) is one of Poe's lesser known short stories, however, it is a good example of Poe's criticism of the society of his era. “The Man That Was Used Up” is a severe critique of the technological progress of the society, the strong male military identity, and even racism as such. The short story is full of exaggerating and it ridicules the optimistic beliefs of the

¹³ Vincent Buranelli, *Edgar Allan Poe* (New Haven: Twayne Publishers, 1961) 17.

¹⁴ Edward Wagenknecht, *Edgar Allan Poe: A Man Behind the Legend* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963) 141.

¹⁵ Vincent Buranelli, *Edgar Allan Poe* (New Haven: Twayne Publishers, 1961) 44.

¹⁶ Edward Wagenknecht, *Edgar Allan Poe: A Man Behind the Legend* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963) 57.

society in Poe's time. Nevertheless, "The Man That Was Used Up" is not a mere satire. Apart from mockery and sharp sarcasms, the short story clearly presents the danger of technological progress and the serious problems of humanity in general.

It is quite clear from the above mentioned facts that, unlike his contemporaries (Ralph W. Emerson or Walt Whitman for instance), Edgar Allan Poe did not share the optimistic belief in the inherent goodness of human beings. In his short fiction, Poe frequently presents the dark side of human soul, ridicules the progress and democratic ideals, and even questions the moral values of the whole society. In the book *Edgar Allan Poe: The Man behind the Legend*, Edward Wagenknecht claims that Poe "disbelieved in the inspiration of moral wisdom of the majority."¹⁷

Edgar Allan Poe was, and still is, a popular writer, and therefore we may say that his works have had a great influence upon the majority of the reading public. Moreover, the realization of the main character's faults may lead toward the conversion of the reader's values. In general terms, Poe's short stories show the dark side of human life and the hypocrisy of the society, which is moral only on the surface, but rotten deep inside. Edgar Allan Poe was not a narrow-minded moralist and his works makes the reader realize how wicked people sometimes are and what are the consequences of evil acts and behaviour.

According to Melissa Howard's essay "The Moral in Edgar Allan Poe" (2007), Poe claims that he writes only to achieve the desired emotional effect, while his writing, especially his short stories, provides a mirror for the dark heart of mankind.¹⁸ In fact, by exposing the wretched and evil characters of people, Poe reveals to the reader the hopelessly depraved nature of man and by extension the dark sides and depravity of the whole society.

It is clear that intentionally or unintentionally what Poe repeatedly gives us is a series portraits showing depravity and despair in various forms.

¹⁷ Edward Wagenknecht, *Edgar Allan Poe: A Man Behind the Legend* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963) 88.

¹⁸ see Melissa Howard, "The Moral in Edgar Allan Poe," *Suite 101* (2007), 5 January 2011 <<http://www.suite101.com/content/the-moral-in-edgar-allan-poe-a31504>>.

Perhaps these portraits are a mirror in which he subconsciously hopes that society will look into and in one of the portraits recognize itself for what it is—depraved and hopeless.¹⁹

While dealing with Poe's "Philosophy of Composition" (1846) and the implied moral in his writings, Melissa Howard found out several interesting facts concerning the instructive features in Poe's short stories. She states that Edgar Allan Poe clearly sees and understands the depraved nature of man and by exposing it provides a mirror for the erroneous society. Howard in her essay claims that:

Poe admits to placing before us a teaser. [...] Poe clearly understands the depraved nature of man, a nature that humans use all sorts of civilized conventions to buffer themselves against so that they can forget that they are no better than the serial murderer whose deeds they so avidly read about in the morning paper.²⁰

Presenting the dark side of human soul and all the bad features of human nature is typical of Poe. It is precisely as Edward Wagenknecht states in his book *Edgar Allan Poe: The Man Behind the Legend*: "His [Poe's] imagination dwelt on the dark side of human character and experience."²¹

Nevertheless, Poe certainly does not expect the reader to identify with the bad and perverse characters in his short stories. In his works, Edgar Allan Poe is clearly exposing the wrong features of human nature to make the reader (and by extension the whole society) realise them, not to imitate them. David Hirsch nicely expressed it in his critical essay "Poe as Moralist" (1998):

Poe expects the reader to distance himself from the narrator. The ethical accountability of the characters is exactly what Poe encourages the

¹⁹ Melissa Howard, "The Moral in Edgar Allan Poe," *Suite 101* (2007), 5 January 2011 <<http://www.suite101.com/content/the-moral-in-edgar-allan-poe-a31504>>.

²⁰ Melissa Howard, "The Moral in Edgar Allan Poe," *Suite 101* (2007), 5 January 2011 <<http://www.suite101.com/content/the-moral-in-edgar-allan-poe-a31504>>.

²¹ Edward Wagenknecht, *Edgar Allan Poe: A Man Behind the Legend* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963) 77.

reader to think about. [...] We are justified in thinking of them as characters whose behavior raises moral and ethical questions.²²

In general we may say that Edgar Allan Poe as an author of fiction is famous for “seeing all the dark and hidden corners, all the criminal inclinations, that exist in people,”²³ even in the proper and respectable members of the so-called upper class society.

In “Spanking the Master: Mind-Body Crossing in Poe’s Sensationalism,” (2001) David Leverenz affirms that Poe often “shocks readers with spectacles of dominance and abjection in which highly cultivated men lose their mental controls”²⁴ and commit terrible crimes without any deeper feeling of guilt.

In Poe’s short story “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839), Roderick Usher, the main character, is a well-educated man, an aristocrat from a wealthy family. Nevertheless, the reader soon realises that Roderick is an oversensitive coward incapable of any action, and that his moral virtues are at least controversial if not missing. Roderick Usher does not act like a real gentleman. He let his sister, Lady Madeline, die even though he was able to save her.

“The Fall of the House of Usher” may be perceived as a typical example of the above mentioned principle showing the human depravity and criminal inclinations of all men. In this short story, Roderick Usher is a man from the upper class society, and therefore the reader would expect his behaviour to be appropriate for a gentleman in any possible situation. However, Edgar Allan Poe in his short stories presents the noblemen as they really are, equal to the common people, i.e. susceptible to mistakes, lying etc.

One might argue that when writing “The Fall of the House of Usher,” Poe probably did not want to strictly present a moral lesson or an undeniable general truth; he was rather trying to bring forth a sense of terror to the reader. Therefore

²² David Hirsch, “Poe as Moralist: the Transvaluation of Values” 1998, 12 January 2011
<<http://www.eapoe.org/papers/psblctr/pl19951.htm>>.

²³ Yisroel Shtern, “Edgar Allan Poe,” trans. Renata Singer (2005), 5 January 2011
<<http://www.yisroelshtern.org/images/eng/essays/poe.pdf>>.

²⁴ David Leverenz, “Spanking the Master: Mind-Body Crossing in Poe’s Sensationalism,” *A Historical Guide to Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Gerald J. Kennedy, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) 98.

this short story might be considered a typical example of the famous concept “art for art’s sake” because in a place of a moral judgement, Poe creates a sensation/a mood – terror.

Nevertheless, the emotional effect, the terror, may be identical or at least parallel with the moral lesson presented in the story. The same case may be found in “Morella” and “Ligeia,” in which according to Jay L. Halio, the horror is in fact the moral of the story.²⁵

Moreover, in “The Fall of the House of Usher,” Poe clearly invokes the question whether it is (im)moral to stay passive and do nothing when we are able to stop the evil from happening. Questioning whether something is right or wrong may be naturally considered moralizing. On the other hand, there is a significant difference between Edgar Allan Poe and the authors of didactic literature. Poe has always allowed the reader to answer the questions and decide on his own, he is never imposing the right solution.

Another good example of a respectable man committing a terrible crime (in this case murder) is “Thou Art the Man,” first published in 1844. However, this short story is not purely about death and crime; it is also a story about guilt and the dilemma of execution of justice.

The plot involves a man wrongfully accused of murdering his uncle Mr. Shuttleworthy, whose corpse is missing. The narrator finds the body and sets up a plot to expose the victim’s good friend, a respectable gentleman Mr. Goodfellow, whom he suspects from the murder. When the corpse points to the best friend exclaiming “Thou art the man!” the suspect confesses immediately. No doubt now remains of the guilt of the nephew. The real culprit is arrested and receives the sentence of death.

At the end of the story, we find out that the nephew inherited the fortune of his uncle and started a new life. This short story is a good example of Poe’s sense of morality because the guilty person is punished and the fortunate nephew can start a new life.

Another significant example of Edgar Allan Poe’s concern about morality is “The Masque of the Red Death” (1842). It tells the story of Prince Prospero and

²⁵ see Jay L. Halio, “The Moral Mr. Poe,” *Poe Newsletter* 2.1 (1968): 23, 26 December 2010
<<http://www.eapoe.org/pstudies/PS1960/p1968204.htm>>.

other wealthy nobles who are hiding in the abbey to avoid a dangerous plague. One night, during a masquerade ball, Prospero notices a mysterious figure, and dies right after confronting this stranger.

This short story is in fact an allegory about life and death. Moreover, it presents the absolute powerlessness of all human beings to escape death. In the story, Prince Prospero is punished because of his arrogant belief that he can protect his life by using his immense wealth. According to Jay L. Halio, “The Masque of the Red Death” is another short story on the will in which Poe presents a moral.

Further evidence of Poe’s deeply moral, though hardly didactic, concern with the effects of a Faustian will rivalling God is provided by the extraordinary lengths to which Prince Prospero goes to avoid death, and his peculiarly horrible end in “The Mask of the Red Death.” Death, whether by plague or other causes, is the common lot of man, and no castle however powerful may shut it out; on the contrary, the attempt to escape may only intensify its horror.²⁶

The moral of this horror story is, as well as in the above mentioned “Morella” and “Ligeia,” based on the inherent human fear of death. However, unlike other Poe’s short stories, the moral of “The Masque of the Red Death” is absolutely clear – no matter how rich and powerful you are, you cannot avoid death because it is a logical conclusion of a natural process – life.

“Metzengerstein” (1832) is a short story which largely resembles a Gothic horror. However, it is not a plain and simple horror story. “Metzengerstein” presents a life-death issues and the frequent motive of hatred and evil, which leads to a terrible but deserved ending.

The short story takes place in Hungary and it concerns the life of two very old aristocratic families – Metzengerstein and Berlifitzing –, which have hated and despised each other for centuries. One day the stables of the Berlifitzing family catch fire in which the family’s patriarch is killed. Frederick, the young Baron von Metzengerstein, is suspected of causing the fire, however there is no

²⁶ Jay L. Halio, “The Moral Mr. Poe,” *Poe Newsletter* 2.1 (1968): 24, 26 Dec. 2010
<<http://www.eapoe.org/pstudies/PS1960/p1968204.htm>>.

evidence. At the end of the story, Frederick is killed when his horse (presumably inhabited by Berlifitzing's soul) bears him into the burning castle.

The plot of this complex and mysterious short story was concisely summed up by David Leverenz: "A proud Hungarian aristocrat has been possessed by his rival's horse, whose fiery and demonic malignity terrorizes him into being burned to death in his own castle."²⁷

As usual, "Metzengerstein" is a short story based on the concept of Fear. However, it combines both realistic and supernatural features, and can be read as an allegory. In fact, in the short story, Poe presents a strong warning that evil always repays with evil.

Even though, at the first sight, the short story might seem rather violent and morbid because of all the deaths by fire etc, it clearly shows that bad things happen to bad people – Frederick sets on fire Berlifitzing's stables and later dies in his own burning castle. The moral lesson of "Metzengerstein" may be best summed up by a biblical quotation *an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth*, so that the reader should realize that evil is not worth it.

"A Descent into the Maelström" (1841) is another horror short story with a moral lesson based on the concept of Fear. It tells the story of a man who has survived a terrible hurricane and a whirlpool. Several years before the story is told, the man went fishing with his two brothers, even though they were strongly warned that it was dangerous because the weather might change soon.

The man was the only one to survive, both his brothers died in the Maelström. When the powerful storm begins, the man was absolutely terrified and frozen with panic anxiety. Nevertheless, during the observation of the Maelström, he realized that it is beautiful and awesome, he grew reconciled with his fate, and finally managed to survive.

The main character of the short story faced a certain death but overcame it due to his iron will. "A Descent into the Maelström" is not an ordinary adventure story or a simple macabre fiction. It is a tale in which the emotional effect is of great importance and has a significant impact on the reader. In general, we may

²⁷ David Leverenz, "Spanking the Master: Mind-Body Crossing in Poe's Sensationalism," *A Historical Guide to Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Gerald J. Kennedy, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) 99.

say that the short story is mainly based on sensation, emphasizing the feelings of terror and the human fear of death.

Nevertheless, the moral judgement is clearly presented – the fishermen were punished for being arrogant and too much daring. Jay L. Halio concisely summed it up in his essay “The Moral Mr. Poe”:

Again, the moral basis for “A Descent into the Maelström” depends upon the hubris of the three brothers who make their fishing despite repeated warnings of near disaster. At last their defiance of God’s natural wonder — the maelström — meets with catastrophe. But what saves, or redeems, the surviving brother? [...] I submit that his acknowledgement of God’s grandeur as they approach the gulf and his submission to it, along with a recovery of hope are what save him. His new hope derives from recognition of natural laws and his willingness to trust his life to them rather than resist them. Nor is his “hurried prayer to God,” as they begin their descent, to be overlooked. In short, like others of Poe’s heroes, the fisherman pays for his hubris, but unlike many of them, he is given an opportunity for some saving insight before it is too late.²⁸

The moral lesson, as well as the implicit presence of God, is in “A Descent into the Maelström” clearly stated, and yet many critics claim that Edgar Allan Poe was an immoral atheist. In the essay “Edgar Allan Poe and Religion,” the author claims that it is a common, almost automatic, assumption that Poe was an irredeemable atheist.²⁹ However, the obvious presence of morality in his short stories makes the reader doubt it.

“Never Bet the Devil Your Head,” subtitled “A Tale with a Moral,” is a short satirical tale first published in 1841 in *Graham’s Magazine*. The short story is generally considered a harsh attack on transcendentalism, even though Poe clearly denied that he had any specific target while writing it. Nevertheless,

²⁸ Jay L. Halio, “The Moral Mr. Poe,” *Poe Newsletter* 2.1 (1968): 23, 26 December 2010 <<http://www.eapoe.org/pstudies/PS1960/p1968204.htm>>.

²⁹ see The Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore, “Edgar Allan Poe and Religion,” 5 January 2011 <<http://www.eapoe.org/geninfo/poerelig.htm>>.

transcendentalists are mentioned here several times. In fact, after the death of the main protagonist (Toby Dammit), the narrator of the short story sends them a bill for his friend's funeral expenses but they refuse to pay it.

As well as the above mentioned short story, "A Descent into the Maelström," this tale may be considered an illustration of a well-known proverb – *pride comes before a fall* – since both the main heroes in the short stories are punished for their hubris.

The narrator of "Never Bet the Devil Your Head" (presumably Poe himself) is denounced by literary critics and scholars because he has never written a proper moral tale. In response to his critics, who according to him lack the necessary intelligence to see the moral in fiction unless the author makes it obvious, the narrator tells a story of his friend Toby Dammit, who is described as a man of many vices. Dammit often makes rhetorical bets and is especially fond of the expression "I'll bet the devil my head." The narrator unsuccessfully tries to deliver Dammit from his bad habits and even though Toby insults him badly, they remain friends.

One day, while coming across a covered bridge, they are stopped by a turnstile and Dammit immediately bets the devil his head that he can leap over it. Suddenly, an old man in black appears and pushes Dammit into making the leap. Dammit makes a perfect jump, however, in the middle of it, he falls backwards, and when the narrator checks him, he sees that Dammit's head is gone and so is the mysterious man in black. The narrator realizes that just above the turnstile was a sharp iron bar which cut off his friend's head.

Toby Dammit is buried but the bill for his funeral is left unpaid and therefore the narrator has his body dug up and sold for dog's meat. Thus, Toby Dammit, whose name strongly resembles a curse, is punished for his hubris and in principle damned³⁰ for ever.

"Never Bet the Devil Your Head" is a witty burlesque of transcendentalism and the moralizing tyranny over art and literature that Poe so frequently decried in his works of literary criticism. Nevertheless, the moral lesson of this short story is easily discernible, even eye-striking, but according to some interpretations, rather exaggerated or ridiculous.

³⁰ in the traditional (i.e. Christian) sense of the word

On the other hand, in this short story, Poe thoroughly follows the rules of a classical moral tale by uplifting the moral lesson at all costs. Thus, “Never Bet the Devil Your Head” is a short story written in an undoubtedly moral tone even though the interpretations tend to describe this short story as a satire of transcendentalism and occasionally as a parody of didacticism and moralizing in literature. However, whether satirical or not, this short story presents a strong warning against human pride, impudence and overestimating of one’s self.

Generally we may state that even though, Edgar Allan Poe’s short fiction is full of complicated plots, puzzling mysteries, hoaxes, and above all feelings of terror and horror, there is always something (a moral?) *behind* the story plot. In fact, a remarkable consequence of Poe’s short stories might be catharsis,³¹ an ancient concept used by Aristotle to describe the purification of emotions through the evocation of pity and fear.³²

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that Edgar Allan Poe was a real master in evoking fear, and therefore we may say that his short stories have had a great influence on human mind and the perception of moral values in general. Poe certainly knew that a significant way to become a better person is to realise our own faults and try to face them and retrieve them.

Although Edgar Allan Poe is best remembered now as a writer of horror short stories, they comprise only a small part of his writings. In fact, Poe is sometimes called a morbid writer because of his horror stories, which are full of violent and perverse behaviour. However, it is not Poe who is morbid for writing these fearful stories; it is we (the readers) who are morbid for absolutely neglecting the rest of his works.³³

Nevertheless, the reader will notice that in many of Poe’s short stories, fear may be considered the main motif and even the essential element. Here are the most significant examples: “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839), “The

³¹ see more in Chapter Three: Violence as a Means of Catharsis

³² see “Catharsis,” *Britannica Online*, 2011, Encyclopaedia Britannica, 6 January 2011 <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/99492/catharsis>>.

³³ see The Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore, “Poe, Horror and the Supernatural,” 13 January 2011 <<http://eapoe.org/geninfo/poethrsn.htm>>.

Masque of the Red Death” (1842), “The Pit and the Pendulum” (1842), “The Premature Burial” (1844), “The Descent into the Maelström” (1841), “The Tell-Tale Heart” (1843), and many others.

“The Pit and the Pendulum” (1842) is a distinctive short story about the effect of terror/horror on an individual, in this case the narrator who has experienced an indescribable fear. The story is told by an unnamed prisoner who describes being brought to a trial, imprisoned and tortured.

The short story is very effective at inspiring fear and anxiety in the reader because it focuses mainly on the senses. Moreover, the reader does not know why the narrator has been arrested at the first place, nor why. We may say that this short story is one of the most dreadful and appealing at the same time.

Edmund Burke has observed in his works that “whatever is qualified to cause terror is a foundation capable of the sublime.”³⁴ And that is the main reason why Poe’s short stories are so prominent and popular – they invoke the pleasurable thrill of terror and inspire the contemplation on important (moral) issues.

It is true that “The Pit and the Pendulum” is based mainly on the emotional effect – the feelings of terror and horror perceived by the narrator during his imprisonment. Nevertheless, in this short story, Edgar Allan Poe clearly invokes the question of guilt and innocence. In fact, he makes the reader wonder what the narrator did that the punishment is so cruel.

The question of guilt and punishment is in Poe’s short stories frequently presented and “The Pit and the Pendulum” is only one of many examples which make the reader wonder about the seriousness of the protagonist’s transgression provided it exists.

The narrator of the above mentioned short story is imprisoned and tortured and we do not know why, Fortunato in “The Cask of Amontillado” is entombed alive because of an unknown insult, and last but not least, in “The Tell-Tale Heart,” the narrator killed the old man even though he loved him. All these examples invoke a fundamental question whether the punishment and/or death in Poe’s short stories is deserved or not. At any rate, all his short stories illustrate two relevant facts – that the reality is not always pleasant, and human life is not

³⁴ Edmund Burke, “On the Sublime and Beautiful,” *The Harvard Classics*, ed. Charles W. Eliot (New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1909–14) 10 February 2011. <www.bartleby.com/24/2/>.

always fair and trouble-free.

Another interesting fact is that “The Pit and the Pendulum” as well as “Metzengerstein” does not take place in the United States. The first mentioned short story takes place in Spain (in the time of Inquisition) and the latter one in Hungary (presumably in the 18th century). And since nothing in Edgar Allan Poe’s short stories is meaningless, the reader will notice that he may try to suggest that such a terrible thing could never happen in the USA, whereas Europe is a place full of unimaginable perils. In fact, after reading several of Poe’s short stories the reader gets the impression that Europe is a gruesome trap and it takes a great effort to stay there alive.

Nevertheless, even though an ordinary reader might be mostly impressed by Edgar Allan Poe’s conception of Fear and the usage of horror and terror features in his short fiction, there are many significant ideas beyond the story plot that should be considered carefully.

In general terms, Edgar Allan Poe was not an author of didactic literature and moralist *par excellence*. However, the consequences of transgressions and acting against the law and social conventions are in his short stories (even in the horror ones) clearly stated.

Nevertheless, some literary critics still claim Edgar Allan Poe to be a fantastic dreamer with no moral code at all. It is an undeniable truth that his poems mostly focus on the emotional effect and, moreover, are concerned mainly with the aesthetic ideal of Beauty and the profound feelings of Melancholy.

On the other hand, his short stories are not that simple and explicit. However, they come far closer to the consideration of realistic moral problems and clearly present the difference between what is good and what is bad.

Vincent Buranelli in his book states that Edgar Allan Poe in his latter works “links the operation of taste with the moral sense by holding that goodness is beautiful and vice ugly,”³⁵ so that we may argue that it is proper for an author of fiction to look for (moral) goodness in his works.

However, the quickly developing plot and the frequent presence of terror and horror features in Edgar Allan Poe’s short stories may cause certain difficulties, or even confusion, to the reader while seeking for the moral lesson in Poe’s short

³⁵ Vincent Buranelli, *Edgar Allan Poe* (New Haven: Twayne Publishers, 1961) 56.

fiction.

In *Edgar Allan Poe* (1961), Vincent Buranelli claims that the principal reason for the tremendous impact of Poe's short stories is the fact that his profound exploration of horror and terror are based on very human phenomena like mad obsessions, the propensity to perverseness etc.³⁶

Generally speaking, we may affirm that a great number of Poe's tales are constructed on a single unifying idea – the idea of Fear –, and therefore *only* the reader, who manages to get out of the Beauty-Fear effect of Poe's writing, will find there a sense of morality.

To sum it up, it might be argued that there is quite a strong sense of morality in Edgar Allan Poe's short stories even if the moral values are often hidden behind the frightful story plot, which is frequently attractive and therefore dominant. In general, we may say that Edgar Allan Poe's short stories and tales convey a moral that tends to be rather implicit. At first sight, the moral values might be hidden to us. However, the attentive reader must not only read the story but also think it over and dig up the moral values from the depth of Poe's mysterious writing.

³⁶ see Vincent Buranelli, *Edgar Allan Poe* (New Haven: Twayne Publishers, 1961) 67.

4. Violence as a Means of Catharsis

This chapter will deal with *catharsis*, precisely said, with the idea that reading about violence, perversity and death may be a significant means of purging the reader's mind of evil emotions. *Catharsis*, which may be considered a remarkable consequence of Edgar Allan Poe's short stories, is an ancient concept used by Aristotle to describe the purification of emotions through the evocation of pity and fear.³⁷ In fact, Aristotle in his writings claimed that tragedy of any kind produces catharsis through an audience's sympathetic identification with the doomed hero.³⁸

As for the fear, we may say that Edgar Allan Poe was a real master in evoking it. Therefore it might be argued that his short stories have had a great influence on a human mind and the perception of moral values.

Although, Poe as a literary critic is said to be strongly opposed to didacticism and moralizing, he certainly knew that a significant way to become a better person is to realise our own faults and try to face them and retrieve them. Thanks to Poe's intuitive insight into personal character, his short stories are capable of presenting the dark sides of human soul and the bad consequences of acting against the law and ethical standards of the society.

Vincent Buranelli in his book *Edgar Allan Poe* (1961) summed it up as follows: "Poe has created a universe, given it psychological laws without denying the existence of the moral law, and peopled it with characters appropriate to such a universe."³⁹

Generally speaking, Edgar Allan Poe was the first important American writer to foreground violence and to probe its psychological origins.⁴⁰ In fact, in many

³⁷ see "Catharsis," *Britannica Online*, 2011, Encyclopaedia Britannica, 6 January 2011
<<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/99492/catharsis>>.

³⁸ see Gerald J. Kennedy, "Poe in Our Time," *A Historical Guide to Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Gerald J. Kennedy, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) 4.

³⁹ Vincent Buranelli, *Edgar Allan Poe* (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1977) 74.

⁴⁰ see Gerald J. Kennedy, "Poe in Our Time," *A Historical Guide to Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Gerald J. Kennedy, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) 4.

of Poe's short stories, the narrators or the main characters are nervous, paranoid and oversensitive madmen and/or perverse and violent murderers. However, their tragic stories reveal the depravity of the whole society, not only the perversity of the individual.

We may argue, of course, that many of Poe's short story characters are considered to be bad, evil and guilty. Nevertheless, the guilt should not be taken here in the traditional (i.e. Christian) sense. David Grantz in his essay "Perversity, Poe's primal impulse" specifies Poe's relation towards morality and guilt as follows:

Poe did declare that perversity is a fundamental force which permeates human existence. [...] In Poe's fiction morality is the tension played out between the assertive, creative vitality of his narrators and the perverse, betraying impulse to self-ruination. [...] Since mortal man, perversely, violates his own higher spirit, conscience, also perversely, becomes the adjudicator for his violations. [...] When a character commits evil, he has not violated God; he has violated his own spirit. In violating his own spirit, he has acted from impulses that he could not control, since his very being has been implanted with the seed of its own annihilation. Though he acts for the reason that he should *not* act, he can no more defy those actions than can he defy gravity. Yet he regrets.⁴¹

According to the popular opinion, Poe's short stories and tales are said to be non-didactic and therefore there is no guilt and no sin in them. His characters do not usually feel guilty because they did a bad thing. Guilt for Poe is perverseness, the desire for self-destruction.⁴²

Joseph J. Moldenhauer has in his critical essay "Murder as a Fine Art: Basic Connections between Poe's Aesthetics, Psychology, and Moral Vision" (1968) confirmed that Poe's protagonist is usually driven by inner compulsions or beset by horrific external forces.⁴³

⁴¹ David Grantz, "Perversity, Poe's primal impulse" (2001), 12 January 2011 <<http://www.poedecoder.com/essays/safe/index.shtml>>.

⁴² see Daniel Hoffman, *Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe* (New York: Anchor Press, 1973) 286.

⁴³ see Joseph J. Moldenhauer, "Murder as a Fine Art: Basic Connections between Poe's

Moreover, Joseph J. Moldenhauer claims that: “He [the protagonist of the short story] seems to assert no control over his acts, and moves inexorably toward destruction.”⁴⁴ However, this destructive desire and perverse inner compulsions are in Poe’s short stories clearly defined as bad and harmful.

Edgar Allan Poe as an author of fiction was certainly exploring and challenging morality, not speaking (and writing) against it. To defend Poe’s short fiction David Hirsch in his essay “Poe as Moralist” says:

An author who creates a universe in which crimes are committed, while those who commit them frequently do not register a consciousness of having sinned, is certainly an author touching morality. [...] Perhaps it is because Poe’s characters sometimes seem to feel no guilt for crimes they surely have committed, or actually deny feeling guilt for their crimes, that we mistakenly refuse to give Poe credit for raising moral issues in his fiction. [...] We may try to re-define Poe as a “psychologist of morals.”⁴⁵

In fact, Edgar Allan Poe may be considered one of the first real psychologists in the history of American short fiction. In his short stories, Poe presents the dark side of human soul and explores the psychological origins and dynamics of men’s wicked behaviour in highly sophisticated and strictly analytic way. Therefore we may claim that Poe’s works raise very important social and moral issues, and try to clarify to the reader inner impulses that lead people to sin.

David Grantz in his essay “Perversity, Poe’s primal impulse” deals with the motive of guilt, sin and moral responsibility in Poe’s short stories. Interestingly, Grantz claims that sin for Poe is the damaging of one’s personality, not the violation of commandments, rules or laws. Grantz specifies Poe’s opinions of sinning as follows:

Aesthetics, Psychology, and Moral Vision,” *PMLA* 83 (1968): 284, 22 Jan. 2011

<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1261183>>.

⁴⁴ Joseph J. Moldenhauer, “Murder as a Fine Art: Basic Connections between Poe’s Aesthetics, Psychology, and Moral Vision,” *PMLA* 83 (1968): 284, 22 January 2011

<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1261183>>.

⁴⁵ David Hirsch, “Poe as Moralist: the Transvaluation of Values” 1998, 12 January 2011

<<http://www.eapoe.org/papers/psblctr/pl19951.htm>>.

Poe would say that sin is always committed against the self, and that the commission of sin cannot always be resisted because the perverse impulse is primal. [...] In Poe, wrong is wrong because it is perverse, not because the Bible told him so. Wrong is wrong because it is damaging to the personality.⁴⁶

The reader will notice that Edgar Allan Poe's view of guilt is completely indifferent to the traditional distinctions between right and wrong in the contemporary society. Nevertheless, we may say that violence and cruelty is present in his short stories to prevent such a terrible behaviour in reality, because the more terrifying is the story, the biggest impact on the reader. In fact, nearly all of Poe's short stories may be considered a strong warning against acting in an inappropriate or sinister way.

"Berenice," presumably one of Poe's most violent and cruel short stories, is a good example of Poe's intention to discourage readers from wicked behaviour and transgressions by exposing the consequences of such deeds (although the consequences in Poe's short stories might be occasionally exaggerated).

"Berenice" was first published in the *Southern Literary Messenger* in 1835 and the contemporary readers were so horrified by the story's violence that they complained to the editor. Nevertheless, by this short story, Edgar Allan Poe was following the popular tradition of the Gothic fiction, even though his usage of horror and terror was much more sophisticated.

Like many of Poe's short stories "Berenice" is told by a mentally unstable narrator. The story follows the life of Egaeus who has married his extraordinarily beautiful cousin, Berenice. Unfortunately, her beauty and health are ruined by a serious disease. At this point, we may compare "Berenice" to two other Poe's short stories, which deal with the same topic – a decay of a beautiful woman –, "Ligeia" and "Morella." In all the above mentioned short stories, the ending is more than tragic, the narrator always loses his beautiful young wife, and moreover, he is not allowed to mourn in peace because something even more terrible happens.

⁴⁶ David Grantz, "Perversity, Poe's primal impulse" 2001, 12 January 2011
<<http://www.poedecoder.com/essays/safe/index.shtml>>.

The most terrifying part of the story begins right after Berenice dies and is buried. For a long time, Egaeus has been obsessed with Bernice's perfectly white teeth and he cannot stop thinking about them even after her death. One day when Egaeus sits in a library, a servant enters and tells him that Bernice's grave has been violated and she was found there still alive. Egaeus finds his clothes covered in blood and beside him a box containing 32 teeth.

Although Poe does not include the scene where the teeth are pulled out, the reader can easily imagine the horror of such incident and the subsequent desperation of Egaeus when he finds out what has actually happened. Moreover, the story emphasizes that all the teeth were removed and that Berenice was still alive during this brutal procedure, so the reader is perfectly aware of the fear and suffering Berenice has been through.

In this short story, pulling teeth may represent a constant human fear of health deterioration, death and mortality in general. As usual, Edgar Allan Poe uses the inherent fear of death and the feelings of horror and terror to draw the reader's attention to an important topic. Nevertheless, the short story is not purely about violence and death; Poe warns the reading public against the danger of becoming obsessed, because even a trivial obsession may change the whole human personality, as it did in the case of the narrator.

Egaeus regards Berenice "not as a thing to admire, but to analyze; not as an object of love, but as the theme of the most abstruse although desultory speculation."⁴⁷ Simply said, as Berenice gets sick and her beauty deteriorates, she becomes for Egaeus a thing, a mere object of analysis, not a real human being. In fact, the only part of her body which interests him is her teeth. This perverse attitude leads finally to a terrible obsession and the gruesome act Egaeus has committed at the end of the story.

In general, we may state that in this short story Edgar Allan Poe invokes a very important question concerning the relationship of men and women and reveals and criticizes the weaknesses of the society of his time. As well as many other Poe's short stories, "Berenice" may be considered a psychological study of obsession and compulsive behaviour. Furthermore, Poe exposes here serious

⁴⁷ Edgar Allan Poe, "Berenice," *The Complete stories*, ed. John Seelye (London: Campbell Publishers, 1992) 134.

problems of the individual and by extension of the whole society – selfishness and obsession with material possession.

In the past, women were generally considered mere objects to possess, not individuals with their own feelings and needs. The reader will notice that in Poe's short stories there is only one thing a beautiful young woman can do to draw attention and that is to die. Putting aside the fact that death of a beautiful woman is the most poetic topic in the world⁴⁸ we may consider the frequent appearance of death of beautiful women in Poe's short stories a criticism of social structure and imposed social roles of men and women.

Death of a beautiful young woman may be found in Edgar Allan Poe's short stories quite often. In fact, Poe uses it to draw the reader's attention and to make the general reading public contemplate important moral topics. We may say that cruel and undeserved death of a young and innocent person touches even the most cynical reader, and therefore Poe's short stories have always had a great influence on the opinions of the readership.

⁴⁸ see Edgar Allan Poe, "The Philosophy of Composition," *The Harper American Literature: Compact Edition*, ed. Donald McQuade (New York: Harper & Row, 1987) 727.

5. Perversity as a Primal Impulse

Edgar Allan Poe is an author well-known for the theory of perverseness in which he presents the human tendency towards violence as irresistible. In fact, due to his horror tales, Poe has become a real authority on the matter of violence and perversity. In *Edgar Allan Poe: The Man Behind the Legend*, Edward Wagenknecht says:

If Poe is widely regarded as perverse, he himself is largely responsible for the impression; through his theoretical discussion of it in “The Imp of the Perverse” and his illustrations of it in “The Black Cat” and elsewhere, he made himself one of the great popular authorities on perverseness.⁴⁹

“The Imp of the Perverse” (1845) is a short story that begins as an essay in which the narrator describes and explains a self-destructive impulse, “an innate and primitive principle of human action, a paradoxical something, which we may call *perverseness*.”⁵⁰

Furthermore, Edgar Allan Poe through the narrator’s speech affirms that the *prima mobilia* (primary motivation) of the human soul – the Imp of the Perverse – has always been overlooked by moralists. Nevertheless, the important point is that “for Poe, as for the narrator, perverseness is clearly a propensity with a moral aspect or role.”⁵¹

The narrator of the short story claims that the Imp of the Perverse makes people commit immoral and violent acts, and that he is “one of the many uncounted victims”⁵² of this irresistible impulse. Furthermore, the narrator says

⁴⁹ Edward Wagenknecht, *Edgar Allan Poe: A Man Behind the Legend* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963) 54.

⁵⁰ Edgar Allan Poe, “The Imp of the Perverse,” *The Complete stories*, ed. John Seelye (London: Campbell Publishers, 1992) 856.

⁵¹ John Cleman, “Irresistible impulses: Edgar Allan Poe and the Insanity Defence,” *American Literature* 63.4 (1991): 638, 6 January 2011 <<http://www.jstor.org/pss/2926871>>.

⁵² Edgar Allan Poe, “The Imp of the Perverse,” *The Complete stories*, ed. John Seelye (London: Campbell Publishers, 1992) 858.

that people do wrong only because they feel they *should not* do it. In fact, what Poe presents here is a theory of doing wrong only for the wrong's sake.

The famous French writer and symbolist poet Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867), who was a great admirer and translator of Edgar Allan Poe, studied many of his critical works and in his short fiction observed a phenomenon which he called a fascination of the abyss, i.e. the human fascination with danger and death. In his "New Notes on Edgar Poe" (1857) Baudelaire says:

He [Poe] has imperturbably affirmed the natural wickedness of man. There is in man, he says, a mysterious force which modern philosophy does not wish to take into consideration; nevertheless, without this nameless force, without this primordial bent, a host of human actions will remain unexplained, inexplicable. These actions are attractive only *because* they are bad or dangerous; they possess the fascination of the abyss.⁵³

Poe's theory of doing wrong for the wrong's sake and Baudelaire's fascination of the abyss are in fact two terms expressing the same idea – the uncontrollable human desire to destroy oneself.

The second part of "The Imp of the Perverse" is more concrete. The narrator describes here the way he has murdered a man using a poisonous candle. The coroner believes it was a natural death and the narrator inherits the man's estate without a problem. There is no evidence, no suspicion of the murder, and therefore the narrator knows he can never be caught. In fact, he realizes that he will be safe forever ... unless he confesses to the crime. At this point, the narrator feels an irresistible impulse to confess, and as he does so, he is arrested and sentenced to death.

What is really remarkable about "The Imp of the Perverse" and Poe's theory of perverseness in general is that the Imp, which was *de facto* the primary impulse to the murder, has finally impelled the narrator to confess. Thus, Poe has in the above mentioned short story presented both the human tendency towards violence and perversity and the consequences of such immoral behaviour.

⁵³ Charles Baudelaire, "New Notes on Edgar Poe" (1857), *The Recognition of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Eric W. Carlson (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1966) 46-47.

Edgar Allan Poe in “The Imp of the Perverse” demonstrates the fact that the narrator even if not feeling guilty was driven by the Imp (or conscience we may call it) to the confession and the subsequent punishment. David Hirsch ascribes the ambiguity of the Imp of the Perverse to Poe’s ironic treatment of the matter. In his essay “Poe as Moralist,” Hirsch says:

One of the ironies in “The Imp of the Perverse” is that what is described by the narrator as the destructive element is actually what, in a normative context, would be called conscience. The Imp of which he [the narrator] speaks is the force which impelled him to the moral act of confession.⁵⁴

We may call it irony; however, the Imp of the Perverse is not only an irresistible impulse towards violent acts but also an impulse towards confession. And confession is a word very often used by moralists. However, it is not a confession in the traditional sense, based on the feelings of guilt. Rather, it is a desire to self-destruction and the person, in this case the narrator of Poe’s short story, does it merely for the reason he should not. Nevertheless, the conclusion is the same – whether driven by the feelings of guilt or by the Imp of the Perverse – the culprit is always punished for his crimes.

“The Imp of the Perverse” is not the only short story in which Edgar Allan Poe presents a character incapable of resisting the strong inner impulse towards perversity. “The Black Cat” and “The Tell-Tale Heart” are two other significant examples.

“The Black Cat” (1843) is a short story concerned mainly with the theme of guilt and perverseness, and it is full of violence. The narrator of the story tells the reader that he has always loved his wife’s black cat Pluto. However, as the time passes the narrator becomes alcoholic, and one night while being drunk, he gouges out the cat’s eye. At first, the narrator regrets his act. “But this feeling soon gave place to irritation. And then came, as if to my final and irrevocable overthrow, the spirit of PERVERSENESS.”⁵⁵

⁵⁴ David Hirsch, “Poe as Moralist: the Transvaluation of Values” 1998, 12 January 2011 <<http://www.eapoe.org/papers/psblctrs/pl19951.htm>>.

⁵⁵ Edgar Allan Poe, “The Black Cat,” *The Complete stories*, ed. John Seelye (London: Campbell Publishers, 1992) 650.

The narrator hangs the cat in the garden, and when he comes home the next day, he finds it burned to the ground except for one wall with imprinted figure of cat on it. Some time after the fire, he finds a similar cat and takes it home. However, one day the cat makes the narrator angry and he tries to kill it, but is stopped by his wife, and kills her instead. He walls her body up in a cellar. During the investigation, the policemen search the cellar and are alarmed by a wailing shriek. They tear down the wall and find the corpse of his wife and a black cat on it. The narrator has walled the cat up by an accident and that was a fatal mistake.

“The Black Cat” is one of Poe’s most powerful horror stories and a psychological study at the same time. It describes the narrator’s personality being destroyed by alcohol. In the story the narrator admits that perverseness is one of the primitive impulses of the human heart and that it was the main reason of his overthrow.⁵⁶ What the narrator calls “perverseness” makes his behaviour violent and obsessed, and finally leads to the killing of the cat and to the murder of his wife. In fact, Poe claims that this perverseness is part of every human heart and that it is only a matter of time when it comes out.

David Grantz in his essay “Perversity, Poe’s primal impulse,” claims that Edgar Allan Poe shows us the dark impulses behind the human conscience. This theory is the one Poe was most often criticised for by scholars because of the implicit negation of God included in it. To quote Grantz more precisely:

According to Poe, people wreck their lives because of impulses beyond their control. This thesis flies in the face of the moral view, which states that a conscious choice has been made by the individual to defy the will of God.⁵⁷

The fact that people are capable of terrible things such as murder and they are doing it (almost) unwillingly is one of Poe’s most controversial opinions. And what is even more controversial considering “The Black Cat” is the fact that the

⁵⁶ Edgar Allan Poe, “The Black Cat,” *The Complete stories*, ed. John Seelye (London: Campbell Publishers, 1992) 650.

⁵⁷ David Grantz, “Perversity, Poe’s primal impulse“ 2001, 12 January 2011 <<http://www.poedecoder.com/essays/safe/index.shtml>>.

narrator kills the cat and bitterly regrets it, whereas after the murder of his wife he has no remorse at all and in cold blood plans how to get rid of the body. The narrator even thinks that the hanging of Pluto might jeopardize his soul's place in heaven. Here is his confession (if we may call it so):

I hung it with the tears streaming from my eyes, and with the bitterest remorse at my heart; – hung it *because* I knew that it had loved me, and *because* I felt it had given me no reason of offence; – hung it *because* I knew that in so doing I was committing a sin – a deadly sin that would so jeopardize my immortal soul as to place it – if such a thing were possible – even beyond the reach of the infinite mercy of the Most Merciful and Most Terrible God.⁵⁸

The narrator knew he was committing a sin and still he did it, because the impulse of perverseness was stronger than his will. In fact, when perverseness gets possession of the narrator's soul, there is no way back for him. Hereafter he will commit more crimes and regret it nevermore.

However, the reader should not enjoy the violence and cruelty of the short story; that was certainly not Poe's aim. The real aim of this rather brutal short story is to show that once you cross the border to the evil side, there is no help. The narrator in "The Black Cat" has realized his heartless crime, however, we may consider this to be only a formal relief for his conscience, not a veritable relief for his soul.

David Grantz in his essay claims that the confession of the narrator is "the utterance of conscience, but it is conscience in Poe's scheme, an agent of the perverse, revealing the "deep secret." It is not conscience which brings the individual into submission to a moral code."⁵⁹ It is true that the narrator in "The Black Cat" has not submitted to the general moral code of the society, but he was punished for that, or at least he was arrested by the police and we as readers expect the punishment to be accomplished.

⁵⁸ Edgar Allan Poe, "The Black Cat," *The Complete stories*, ed. John Seelye (London: Campbell, Publishers 1992) 650.

⁵⁹ David Grantz, "Perversity, Poe's primal impulse" 2001, 12 January 2011 <<http://www.poedecoder.com/essays/safe/index.shtml>>.

“The Black Cat” is certainly a tale with a moral. Poe presents here a character who, controlled by the impulse of perversity, commits terrible crimes, and for some time manages to escape from punishment. However, at the end of the story, the culprit is detected and proved guilty.

In the literary circles, Edgar Allan Poe is frequently related with the theory of human perverseness. In fact, a lot of literary critics and scholars in the history have considered Poe’s true relation to the motive of perversity and violence. Among them, David Grantz who in his essay “Perversity, Poe’s primal impulse” states that:

Poe became enchanted with forces, often mistaken by the pedants of his and our time, as moral evil, but which Poe saw differently. Rather, he explored the counterpart to creativity, insisting that humans are predisposed towards the perverse. [...] Poe illustrates perversity as the “germ” of annihilation as it resides in the human psyche.⁶⁰

In fact, what Grantz is trying to say is that perversity and moral evil are two completely different things. Whereas, perversity is a primitive irresistible impulse of human heart, moral evil is an intentional and conscious violation of social conventions and laws, and the reader should not confuse them. To quote Grantz once again: “If he [Poe] presents a narrative in illustration of human perversity, the reader should take him at his word.”⁶¹

“William Wilson” (1839) is a short story exploring the theme of rivalrous doppelganger and the obsession with one’s own identity. It might be also considered a profound psychological study of alter ego and self-splitting. In this tale of the divided self, Edgar Allan Poe introduces an irresistible dual impulse of human soul – committing evil and judging oneself at the same time –, which is in other short stories called the Imp of Perverse.

The story is told by a narrator who calls himself William Wilson. The narrator describes his boyhood in England and especially one important event –

⁶⁰ David Grantz, “Perversity, Poe’s primal impulse“ 2001, 12 January 2011
<<http://www.poedecoder.com/essays/safe/index.shtml>>.

⁶¹ David Grantz, “Perversity, Poe’s primal impulse“ 2001, 12 January 2011
<<http://www.poedecoder.com/essays/safe/index.shtml>>.

meeting another boy who shared the same name, had the same appearance, and moreover, was born on the same day. The other boy seems to compete with William easily in popularity and gradually begins copying his manners, dress and talk.

One day, William decides to leave the school, but immediately discovers that his double has left the school on the same day. William begins to gamble, cheat and he even tries to seduce a married woman. Every time he does so, his double appears and alerts the others to William's behaviour. One night, William becomes enraged and stabs his double fatally.

To William's horror, a large mirror appears replacing the body of his antagonist and suddenly William sees his own image dabbled in blood and saying: "*In me didst thou exist – and, in my death, see by this image, which is thine own, how utterly thou hast murdered thyself.*"⁶² In fact, the quotation highlights the inseparability of William Wilson and his rivalrous double, and therefore the murder of the double is actually a suicide. The final scene also points out the inseparability of body and mind, not only the inseparability of the two selves.

At the beginning of the story, the narrator is unable to despise his double because he feels they are somehow connected, but gradually he starts to hate him because he always interferes into his life. William is prone to moral weakness and even though he claims that he became evil suddenly and mainly due to his double, the reader will notice that the shift in William's morality is quite steady. In fact, the reader can observe his depravity in the way he treats his double. Although, William Wilson wishes to get rid of his double and change his immorality, the conclusion of the story shows that William did not reconcile with his second self but rather the second self has triumphed over him.

We may claim that the second self haunts William Wilson and leads him to insanity. Nevertheless, at the same time it represents William's conscience. Daniel Hoffman in his book *Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe* (1973) claims that William's double is both his conscience and his Imp of Perverse.⁶³ Moreover, we

⁶² Edgar Allan Poe, "William Wilson," *The Complete stories*, ed. John Seelye (London: Campbell Publishers, 1992) 418.

⁶³ see Daniel Hoffman, *Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe* (New York: Anchor Press, 1973) 231.

may state that the rivalrous double represents William's attempt to project his inner evil to a person from the outside world. William blames his double for his sudden turn to evil but by doing that he actually blames himself.

Moreover, at the beginning of the story, the narrator admits that "William Wilson" is not his real name. The reader will notice that the pseudonym actually announces that it is William's *will* to have a double – "Wilson" may be also interpreted as the "son of will." Thus, the story suggests that William subconsciously desires to have a double because he is not able to believe that he is the evil one. He simply needs someone to blame for his vices, which is, on the other hand, a typical human quality. However, the more William hates his double and tries to reject him, the more they are alike. Hence, the basis for the moral lesson of this short story is a common truth – one cannot get rid of his dark side by simply ignoring it.

"The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" (1845) is another of Poe's horror short stories which explores the extreme psychological state of mind. It tells the story of a mesmerist who puts a man in a hypnotic state at the moment of his death. In the story, Poe uses detailed descriptions which effectively invoke feelings of shock and uneasiness in the reader's mind.

Valdemar's death is portrayed with brutal accuracy as the majority of deaths in Poe's short stories. Nevertheless, the story also portrays a typical human feature – attempt to halt or at least postpone death. Valdemar was mesmerized and therefore his body did not decay. However, when the narrator wakes him up, the result is terrible – the corpse rots within a minute.

Typically, in this short story, Poe showcases the uncontrollable terror and the agony of a tormented mind. Moreover, he demonstrates the dangerousness of trifling with death. Nevertheless, the most significant fact in this particular short story (but also in the whole *oeuvre* of Edgar Allan Poe) is that even though Poe generally creates unreal persons in (almost) impossible situations, the terror in the story is always real and the reader can observe and feel the intensity of the protagonist's feelings whether it is fear, hatred or guilt.

6. Death as a Moral Lesson

Many of Poe's short stories deal with the human fear of death. This Chapter will demonstrate the idea of death as a moral lesson. Moreover, it will try to prove that death in Poe's short stories is present not only to achieve the emotional effect (to frighten the reader), but also to discourage the reader from the wicked and perverse behaviour or at least to show the reader various bad consequences of such behaviour.

Death is present in a great number of Poe's short stories. "Ligeia" and "Morella" are two significant examples. In both the short stories, the main heroine dies because of trifling with mysticism and dark powers.

The proximity to death serves as a warning to the main characters in "The Descent into the Maelström" and "The Premature Burial." Poe in his short stories also describes several characters (such as Prince Prospero in "The Masque of the Red Death") who try to avoid death but their attempts are usually vain. Nevertheless, death in Poe's short stories is never accidental; it is always present for a reason.

As well as the Romantics, Edgar Allan Poe is an author interested in death and human miseries. On the other hand, Edward Wagenknecht claims that Poe only wrote what was fashionable and characteristic of the taste of his time. "Fascination with death was typical of the Romantic movement; so was the attraction of incest; so was the association of death with love."⁶⁴

Edgar Allan Poe uses only the themes which were popular in his time and which attracts the majority of the general reading public. In fact, we may say that Poe appeals to the popular taste and imagination because he scares the readers to death. The delight of horror is certainly one of the major reasons for Poe's ongoing popularity. To sum up we may quote Vincent Buranelli, who in his book *Edgar Allan Poe* claims that Poe "did not popularize the horrible and terrible; he specialized in horror and terror *because* he discovered that they were popular."⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Edward Wagenknecht, *Edgar Allan Poe: A Man Behind the Legend* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963) 57.

⁶⁵ Vincent Buranelli, *Edgar Allan Poe* (New Haven: Twayne Publishers, 1961) 25.

Edgar Allan Poe in his works suggests that an extreme suffering of an individual touches the reader more than a catastrophe of many. Moreover, we may argue that by enduring horrible situations such as for example being buried alive (see the example below) the characters in the short stories are hardened and purged of the evil emotions, which is of course a very desirable impact. Hence, the presence of death and suffering in a short story may be very edifying for the reader.

“The Premature Burial” (1844) is a horror story on the theme of being buried alive as evident from the title. The unnamed narrator describes his fear or even a phobia of being buried alive, because of a disease (catalepsy) that makes him from time to time slip into a state of unconsciousness, which can be easily mistaken for death. Although, he made many precautions, one day he awakens in a dark and confined area, and naturally thinks he was buried alive. When he realizes that he is in a small berth on a boat, not in a grave, he is so shocked that he completely forgets about his overwhelming fear of being buried alive. Thanks to this terrible experience the narrator gets rid of his obsession with death and starts to live a normal life. The moral of “The Premature Burial” may be summed up by Poe’s own words: “out of Evil proceeded Good.”⁶⁶

Another Poe’s short story concerned with death (a violent one) is “The Cask of Amontillado” (1846). It is a short story conveyed through the murderer’s perspective. The story tells about narrator’s revenge on a man who has insulted him. During the Carnival, Montresor (the narrator of the story) asks Fortunato (his friend or in fact an ex-friend) to go with him and degust a rare Italian sherry wine – Amontillado. In the wine cellar, Montresor chains Fortunato to the wall and then walls up the niche, entombing him alive. At the end of the story, Montresor reveals that it has been fifty years since he got rid of Fortunato and he has not been caught yet.

The subject-matter of “The Cask of Amontillado” is evidently revenge and murder. However, the Montresor’s motive for the murder is not evident at all. At the first sight, the murder may seem unjustified. On the other hand, Montresor tells the reader that Fortunato has done to him many injuries and insults, so that

⁶⁶ Edgar Allan Poe, “The Premature Burial,” *The Complete stories*, ed. John Seelye (London: Campbell Publishers, 1992) 724.

the reader has no other choice than to speculate if such an extremely cruel punishment was or was not deserved. Moreover, Poe raises here a question whether it is right and moral to revenge without giving a chance to the police and courts to serve justice. This decision is up to the reader. Nevertheless, Poe certainly does not expect the reader to identify with the murderer.

“The Cast of Amontillado” on its surface completely amoral, is perhaps the most moral of Poe’s tales.⁶⁷ However, the morality of the story is hidden and Poe makes the reader to wonder “whether Montresor is a murderer without conscience or whether he has actually been punished by fifty years of guilt and fear.”⁶⁸ At the end of the story, Montresor remarks “*In pace requiescat!*”⁶⁹ which may indicate the fact that Montresor cannot (contrary to Fortunato) rest in peace because of his guilt and the permanent fear that one day he will be caught. So the culprit was once again punished even if not in the traditional way we as readers are used to.

“The Tell-Tale Heart” (1843) is another short story on the extensive list of Poe’s stories concerning death/murder and insanity. The story follows an unnamed narrator who murders an old man and hides his body under the floorboards. However, the murder of the old man is revealed thanks to the narrator’s hallucination that the man’s heart is still beating. In fact, we may consider this hallucination as a manifestation of the narrator’s guilt.

There are no doubts that the narrator of the story is a cruel and cold-blooded villain. He admits that he has murdered the old man even though he loved him and in fact without any justifiable cause (except for his irrational fear of the old man’s vulture eye).

Based on his behaviour we may argue that the narrator is certainly insane, however, throughout the story he claims otherwise. The narrator repeatedly insists that he is not mad, however due to his irrational behaviour this affirmation seems to be hardly credible. Daniel Hoffman in his book *Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe*

⁶⁷ see David Hirsch, “Poe as Moralist: the Transvaluation of Values” 1998, 12 January 2011 <<http://www.eapoe.org/papers/psblctr/pl19951.htm>>.

⁶⁸ David Hirsch, “Poe as Moralist: the Transvaluation of Values” 1998, 12 January 2011 <<http://www.eapoe.org/papers/psblctr/pl19951.htm>>.

⁶⁹ Edgar Allan Poe, “The Cask of Amontillado,” *The Complete stories*, ed. John Seelye (London: Campbell Publishers, 1992) 887.

Poe Poe, concisely states that whereas the happy characters in Poe are those who use their heads; the tormented ones are those who lose their minds⁷⁰ such as undoubtedly the narrator of this short story.

“The Tell-Tale Heart” is in fact a study of paranoia and obsession. Moreover, Poe explores here the human tendency towards violence and depravity. In this short story, death (together with insanity) is the main theme. As well as in many other Poe’s short stories, the emotional effect – the Fear – plays here a major role. Nevertheless, the short story has its moral, which has been concisely summed up in the essay “Edgar Allan Poe and Religion” in which the author affirms:

The narrator who has murdered the old man in “The Tell-Tale Heart” defiantly defends himself against the idea that he is mad. Poe, however, clearly wants us to understand that the character *is* insane, despite his protestations. He may not feel that killing the old man was wrong, but *we* certainly *should*. That he is to be hung in the morning suggests that justice will be served.⁷¹

Moreover, the outcome of each of the above mentioned short stories invites a moral lesson. In “Murder as a Fine Art,” Joseph J. Moldenhauer isolates a didactic level of meaning on which “Poe can be called a conventional moralist.”⁷² In his essay, Moldenhauer summarizes the moral lessons of Poe’s most famous horror short stories as follows:

“The Black Cat” can be construed to mean something like *Be kind to dumb animals – or else!* “The Tell-Tale Heart” and “William Wilson” yield the maxim *Crime does not pay* or *The wages of sin is death*. [...] *Pride goes before a fall* in “The Masque of the Red Death,” “Metzengerstein,” and “Hop-Frog.” “The Fall of the House of Usher”

⁷⁰ see Daniel Hoffman, *Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe* (New York: Anchor Press, 1973) 135.

⁷¹ The Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore, “Edgar Allan Poe and Religion,” 5 January 2011 <<http://www.eapoe.org/geninfo/poerelig.htm>>.

⁷² Joseph J. Moldenhauer, “Murder as a Fine Art: Basic Connections between Poe’s Aesthetics, Psychology, and Moral Vision,” *PMLA* 83 (1968): 285, 22 January 2011 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1261183>>.

might be summed up in the apothegm, *Each man kills the thing he loves the most* – still a moral, though a sentimental and fatalistic one. [...] In these aspects of Poe’s art even a puritan conscience might find comfort.⁷³

Based on the above mentioned facts we may claim that Edgar Allan Poe’s short stories convey on a certain level an obvious moral lesson. In general terms, we may state that the moral of the short story is frequently represented by a simple general truth or a notorious proverb which pertinently describes the reality and inspires the reader to contemplate important moral issues.

⁷³ Joseph J. Moldenhauer, “Murder as a Fine Art: Basic Connections between Poe’s Aesthetics, Psychology, and Moral Vision,” *PMLA* 83 (1968): 285, 22 Jan. 2011
<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1261183>>.

7. Conclusion

This BA thesis explored Edgar Allan Poe's short fiction in order to prove that Poe's works are not written purely for the emotional effect. On the basis of the above mentioned facts we may claim that Poe's short stories always adhere to some kind of explicit or at least implicit moral code. In general terms, this BA thesis proves that Poe's literary works are not amoral or even immoral.

Illustration of tormented mind, agony, terror, fear, and hatred is characteristic of Edgar Allan Poe's writings. Nevertheless, an attentive reader can observe in his short stories much more than that. We can find there profound moral values, relevant social issues and concepts which make the general reading public contemplate important ethical topics such as crime and justice, human behaviour and psychology, and last but not least the eternal question of life and death.

Edgar Allan Poe is not a mere author of horror fiction; he is rather a subtle analyst of human conscience and morals. His realistic portrayal of violence, death, and perversity does not make his works immoral. Rather, his fictional characters remind us of the natural wickedness of man and the depravity of society in general. Through the evocation of terror and fear Edgar Allan Poe purges the reader of evil emotions and pushes him into new moral territory.

To sum it up, Poe's short stories are not written solely in order to scare the reader to death; they are structured to evoke pure emotions and warn the reader against the danger of human vices and the imperfect nature of society. Generally, we may claim that the primary goal of Poe's short fiction is to stimulate the reader's emotional and moral consciousness, and to point out the depravity of both the individual and the society. Poe's short stories are works of pure intellectual exploration, because the reader has to contemplate them with genuine profoundness.

There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book.

Books are either well written, or badly written.

That is all.

(Oscar Wilde)

8. Summary/Shrnutí

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá povídkami Edgara Allana Poea s cílem zjistit zda jsou jeho díla psaná pouze za účelem vyvolat emocionální efekt nebo zda obsahují nějaký zjevný nebo skrytý morální kodex. Tato bakalářská práce analyzuje a srovnává Poeovy povídky s ohledem na morálku, základní společenské zásady a etické normy jeho doby. Hlavním cílem této bakalářské práce je dokázat, že Poeovy povídky zprostředkovávají pozornému čtenáři mravní ponaučení. Kromě toho se tato bakalářská práce snaží dokázat, že Poeova literární díla nejsou nemorální.

Edgar Allan Poe jako literární kritik důrazně vystupoval proti didaktismu a moralizování v literatuře. Ve svých esejích kritizuje své současníky a výslovně vystupuje proti didaktismu, který považuje za pouhý blud či kacírství. Je velmi pravděpodobné, že tento výrok se stal hlavním důvodem, proč je Poe tak často považován za nemorálního. Na druhou stranu je třeba podotknout, že Poeovy povídky mají jistý morální odstín i přes opakovanou přítomnost násilí a značnou zkaženost hlavních postav.

Edgar Allan Poe je znám především jako autor využívající k ohromení čtenáře emocionální efekt – převážně pocity hrůzy a strachu ze smrti. Všechny prvky Poeových povídek přispívají k dosažení tohoto efektu, od zápletky až po prostředí, kde se povídka odehrává. I přestože v mnoha povídkách dominuje emocionální efekt, může zde čtenář najít i pronikavá morální ponaučení. Obecně vzato Poe ve svých dílech velmi často kombinuje estetiku s morálkou.

Jako příklad můžeme zmínit povídky „Morella“ a „Ligeia“, ve kterých i přes značný citový dopad můžeme nalézt mravní ponaučení. Je však skryto až v samotném závěru povídek, kde se stupňuje napětí a graduje pocit zděšení a strachu. V těchto povídkách, tak jako v mnoha dalších, jde mravní ponaučení ruku v ruce s pocity hrůzy a děsu. Z výše uvedených faktů vyplývá, že literatura je schopná obsáhnout jak vzrušení tak morálku.

Při posuzování Poeovy morálky je třeba vzít v úvahu také to, že jeho názory nemusejí být nutně shodné s názory a chováním jeho postav. To, že některé Poeovy postavy tíhnou k násilí nebo mají perverzní sklony neznamená, že Poe jejich chování schvaluje. Právě naopak, Poe ve svých dílech vykresluje

zkaženost jedince i celé společnosti a dává tak čtenáři podnět k zamyšlení se nad sebou samým a nad svým chováním. Celkem vzato nastavují Poeovy povídky zrcadlo nejen čtenáři, ale i celé společnosti.

Navíc Edgar Allan Poe čtenáře rozhodně nenabádá, aby se ztotožnili s hlavním hrdinou, který je bezesporu zkažený a nemorální, ale na jeho příkladu ukazuje, čeho by se měl čtenář v životě vyvarovat a naopak co si zaslouží naši pozornost a úctu. Obecně řečeno Poeovy povídky nabádají k hlubšímu zamyšlení nad morálními problémy doby.

Mnoho Poeových povídek vykresluje skutečnost tak trefně, že by se daly shrnout do jedné věty či přísloví, ze kterého by si čtenář měl vzít ponaučení. Tak například povídka „Metzengerstein“ by se dala považovat za ilustraci biblického rčení oko za oko, zub za zub. „Pád do Maelströmu“ nebo „Maska červené smrti“ pak jednoznačně znázorňují známé přísloví, že pýcha předchází pád.

Pravdou je, že hlavním námětem mnoha Poeových povídek je zločin, smrt a násilí. Jeho povídky však nemůžeme považovat za morbidní či nemorální jenom proto, že popisují smrt a jiná společenská tabu. Poe ve svých dílech líčí skutečný svět, včetně násilí, přetvářky a pokrytectví, protože na rozdíl od mnoha svých současníků nevěřil v pokrok a absolutní dokonalost demokratické společnosti.

Dalším důvodem proč byl Edgar Allan Poe kritiky a učenci tak často odsuzován je fakt, že ve svých dílech nekritizoval pouze obyčejný lid, ale i šlechtice a příslušníky bohatých rodin. Mezi nejznámější příklady Poeovy kritiky gentlemanů z lepší společnosti patří především povídky „Zánik domu Usherů“ a „Vrah jsi ty!“, které perfektně vystihují zkaženost lidí, kteří by měli jít příkladem zbytku společnosti.

Edgara Allan Poea nemůžeme považovat za autora didaktické literatury *par excellence*. Přesto však můžeme v jeho povídkách nalézt morálku i společenské zásady, které je třeba mít na paměti. Hlavní hrdinové Poeových povídek tyto zákony nedodržují, a proto velmi často špatně skončí. Smrt, pohřbení zaživa či šílenství hlavního hrdiny jsou jen některé z příkladů toho, že konat zlo se nikdy nevyplácí. Poeovi hrdinové jednají často nemorálně, a proto je trest nikdy nemine. Hranice mezi dobrem a zlem je tak u Poea jasně viditelná, i když je třeba číst pečlivě a nenechat se příliš ovlivnit Poeovým pojetím strachu, které někdy může zastíňovat mravní ponaučení.

Za další důležitý rys Poeových povídek může být považována katarze. S tímto pojmem přišel již ve starověkém Řecku Aristoteles, který mimo jiné tvrdil, že člověk může být očištěn od špatných myšlenek díky uměleckým a literárním dílům vyvolávajícím lítost či strach. Čtenář již určitě zaznamenal, že strach je v Poeových povídkách nesmírně důležitým, ba přímo nepostradatelným prvkem. Obecně vzato byl Edgar Allan Poe jedním z průkopníků hororové povídky a jeho pojetí strachu a hrůzy je dodnes považováno za legendární.

Edgar Allan Poe je spisovatel s mnoha literárními zásluhami. Kromě toho, že je považován za zakladatele detektivek a za jednoho z nejlepších autorů hororových povídek vůbec, byl také prvním americkým spisovatelem, který zkoumal psychologický původ násilí. Ve svých dílech velmi často zobrazoval postavy s duševními poruchami jako je paranoia, nervozita či posedlost jednou konkrétní myšlenkou. Obecně by se dalo říci, že Poeovy povídky nepopisují pouze lidskou zkaženost, ale i její příčiny, o následcích nemluvě.

Podle obecného mínění jsou Poeovy povídky nedidaktické, protože v nich jen stěží můžeme nalézt pocity viny či uvědomění si hříchu. Na druhou stranu Edgar Allan Poe rozhodně netvrdí, že jeho hlavní hrdinové jsou bez viny či dobří z morálního hlediska. Právě naopak, většina jeho postav je vykreslena záporně. Navíc v žádné ze svých povídek Poe čtenáře nenabádá, aby se s některou z těchto postav ztotožnil.

Edgar Allan Poe ve svých povídkách zkoumá temná zákoutí lidské duše a na názorných příkladech ukazuje špatné vlastnosti, které u lidí objevil, jako například pýchu, pokrytectví, přetvářku, sobectví či zbabělost. Neméně důležitý je fakt, že Poe nezkoumá pouze tyto špatné rysy naší povahy, ale i jejich původ. V podstatě se snaží odhalit, co vede člověka k tomu, že hřeší.

Přesto všechno nenajdeme u Poea hřích v tradičním slova smyslu. Hlavní hrdinové jeho povídek se necítí vinni, protože udělali něco špatného; k těmto hrůzným činům byli dohnáni neodolatelným niterným popudem, a proto sami sebe považují spíše za oběť než za pachatele. I přestože Poeovi hrdinové často spáchají dokonalý zločin, nakonec se vždy prozradí, protože nemohou vydržet pocity viny či strachu z odhalení. Vina a svědomí jdou u Poea ruku v ruce s touhou po sebezničení, a tak i když je hlavní hrdina padouch, nutkání, které ho donutilo jednat proti morálce, jej zároveň přiměje se přiznat.

Velká část kritiků a učenců odmítá Poeovi přiznat zásluhy za šíření povědomí o morálních hodnotách především proto, že Poe ve svých povídkách příliš často zobrazoval každodenní krutou realitu, včetně surového násilí, a navíc tvrdil, že každý člověk, sebevíce vážený a bezúhonný, má sklony ke zkaženosti.

Edgar Allan Poe se bezesporu řadí k hrstce spisovatelů, kteří se nejvíce zasloužili o probádání hranice mezi morálním a nemorálním. Kromě toho každá jeho povídka vyzdvihuje konkrétní morální problém a nabádá k jeho pochopení. Čtenář se chtě nechtě musí rozhodnout, kterou stranu v životě zvolí, zda dobro či zlo. Avšak strašlivé následky nesprávného chování v Poeových povídkách jasně ukazují, že zvolit si cestu zla se nikdy nevyplácí.

Vyobrazení strachu, utrpení a nenávisti je typickým rysem mnoha Poeových povídek. Nicméně pozorný čtenář může v Poeových dílech objevit mnohem víc než jen strach a hrůzu. V jeho povídkách je možno nalézt důležité morální hodnoty a hluboké myšlenky, které nutí čtenáře rozjímat nad etickými problémy, lidským chováním a v neposlední řadě nad otázkou života a smrti.

Edgar Allan Poe není obyčejným autorem hororových povídek. Můžeme ho považovat spíše za důvtipného pozorovatele lidského chování a morálky. Realistické vyličení smrti a mravní zkaženosti v jeho dílech rozhodně nemá za cíl propagovat nemorální chování, ba právě naopak, jeho postavy nám připomínají, že jako jedinci nejsme dokonalí. Navíc vyvoláním strachu a hrůzy očisťuje Edgar Allan Poe čtenáře od zlých myšlenek a rozšiřuje tak jeho morální povědomí.

Na závěr je třeba říci, že Poeovy povídky rozhodně nejsou napsány pouze za účelem vyděsit čtenáře k smrti. Právě naopak, každá z povídek je strukturována tak, aby vyvolávala citové pohnutí a zároveň varovala čtenáře před lidskými neřestmi. Obecně vzato můžeme říci, že Poeovy povídky mají za cíl podnítit čtenářovo svědomí a upozornit na zkaženost a nedostatky společnosti. Avšak jen opravdu hluboké zamyšlení se nad vyličeným morálním problémem povede k objevení mravních ponaučení skrytých v Poeových povídkách.

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Anotace

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá povídkami Edgara Allana Poea s cílem zjistit zda jsou jeho díla psaná pouze za účelem vyvolat emocionální efekt nebo zda obsahují nějaký zjevný nebo skrytý morální kodex. Tato bakalářská práce analyzuje a srovnává Poeovy povídky s ohledem na morálku, základní společenské zásady a etické normy jeho doby. Hlavním cílem této bakalářské práce je dokázat, že Poeovy povídky zprostředkovávají pozornému čtenáři mravní ponaučení. Kromě toho se tato bakalářská práce snaží dokázat, že Poeova literární díla nejsou nemorální.

Annotation

This BA thesis explores Edgar Allan Poe's short fiction in order to find out whether Poe's works are written only for the emotional effect or whether they adhere to some kind of explicit or implicit moral code. This BA thesis analyses and compares Edgar Allan Poe's short stories with regard to the presence or absence of morality, fundamental social conventions and ethical standards of his time. The main aim of this BA thesis is to demonstrate that Poe's short stories convey a moral lesson to the attentive reader. Moreover, this BA thesis tries to prove that his literary works are not amoral or even immoral.